

## THE ITALIAN DEBATE AFTER THE 'RETREAT'

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### Abstract

*The 'Italian retreat from modern architecture' sanctioned by R. Banham (1959), led into the different lines of inquiry undertaken by Italian architects in the Sixties and Seventies, opening the way to mutual exchange between urban studies, planning and design. This articulated debate remains largely overlooked, perhaps because many statements circulated in Italian through handouts, pamphlets and transcripts. Nevertheless, the mutual influence between varied theoretical positions deserves due consideration, partly because this was a period of transition from the major problems of post-war reconstruction to the new demands brought about by the metropolitan dimension acquired by North-Italian cities, facing a new wave of industrialisation and related migratory movements.*

This paper discusses key factors, and figures, which fed the Italian architectural debate at this crucial stage, with a focus on the contribution made by the School of Architecture of Milano.

**Keywords:** Italian architectural debate, post-war Italian architecture, typology, morphology, structurality

### Italy after 1945

In a widespread-devastated Italy, the aftermath of World War II stirred a general demand for a collective and individual catharsis, and for a radical process of institutional and political renewal. The cultural environment changed profoundly.

Before the war, only a few Italian architects had openly shown their opposition to Fascism; even those who had joined the Resistance movement became truly anti-Fascist only much later. Among the supporters of the Resistance, however, were also architects and town planners who, after 1945, yearned for a moral renewal,

questioning the real political and social nature of Fascism (along with writers, artists and film directors). Architects, for their part, were trying to understand the social framework who was soon to require new housing and related services.

Several publications bear reference to this crucial phase of cultural transition,<sup>1</sup> paralleled by the establishment of the MSA (Movimento Studi per l'Architettura) in Milan, the APAO (Associazione per l'Architettura Organica) in Rome, and the Gruppo Pagano in Turin.

The fruitful discussion among intellectuals in view of an institutional and economic reconstruction begun in Milan in December 1945, with the First National Meeting for Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> It declined in Paris, with Italian participation at the *Exposition Internationale de l'Urbanisme et Habitation*,<sup>3</sup> held at the Grand Palais in the summer of 1947. The Milan meeting was a timely confrontation between protagonists of progressive culture, supporters of planning, and heralds of capitalism. At the Paris Exhibition, 'Italy the Rebuilder' made its formal appearance on the European scene. With its age-old building traditions, the gravity of its housing problem, and the critical condition of its people, infrastructure and productive resources, the Italian case was relevant to all other countries.

A few months later though, the elections of 18 April 1948 excluded left-wing representatives from the government and from strategic decisions, marking the demise of any 'revolutionary' prospect.

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<sup>1</sup> *Metron* appeared in August 1945, edited by L. Piccinato and M. Ridolfi. *Domus*, edited by E.N. Rogers from n. 205, 1946, to 223–225, 1947. *Costruzioni-Casabella*, edited by F. Albini, appeared at the end of 1946 with two special issues, one dedicated to the AR (Reunited Architects) plan for Milan (194) and the other to Giuseppe Pagano (195–198). Short-lived publications included *A – Cultura della vita*, edited by L. Bò, C. Pagani and B. Zevi (1946–47); *La Nuova Città*, edited by G. Michelucci (1946); and *La Città, Architettura e politica*, edited by G. De Finetti (1945–46).

<sup>2</sup> Primo convegno nazionale per la ricostruzione edilizia, Milano 14–15–16 dicembre 1945.

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition consisted of five sections : Problème du Logement, Urbanisme, Habitation, Construction, Information. Alongside reconstruction plans for the great cities and some important historical centres, Italy presented a draft of the Plan for Milan, the Piedmont Regional Plan and experimental designs for new neighbourhood units.

Hastily implemented, reconstruction plans worsened the pre-existing situation.<sup>4</sup> Distinguishing environmental features were often neglected, while local solutions were totally unrelated to a comprehensive national vision.

*'In a country like Italy where civilization has remained creative over the centuries, the scars bearing witness to the past are added to those of the living nation.'* (Urbanisme et Habitation, 1947, p. 42). The text published in the catalogue of the Paris Exhibition introduced the problem of relating the new to the old, so critical for most Italian cities.

The problem of how to build for the future without losing the city distinguishing townscape and environmental heritage was clearly expressed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers at the 8<sup>th</sup> CIAM held at Hoddesdon (UK) in 1951. Rogers stressed the need to preserve, re-establish, enliven or even reinvent the heart of a city in different places and circumstances: *'the composition of a complete work, though logical and elegant, cannot fulfil the set aims if it does not also achieve a rich, varied and surprising orchestration.'* (Rogers, 1958/1997, p. 260)

### **The Italian retreat: the new generations and 'Casabella-Continuità'**

As editor of the new series of 'Casabella-Continuità' Rogers undertook a profound revision of the legacy of Rationalism (Rogers, 1955, 1956, 1957). Pondering over the role of history and tradition - in architecture and society - became a recurring theme in his editorials, in debates and researches published in this journal. Rogers stigmatised the inappropriateness of mimicking the expressive and compositional canons of the Modern Movement, which had degenerated into the formalism of the International Style. Rogers believed that contemporary architecture had two possible way outs: improving building techniques required to assess its figurative language as a vital part of each physical environment, or improving expressive

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<sup>4</sup> City reconstruction was subject to plans formalised by a decree of March 1945. While the Town Planning Act of August 1942 required each Master Plan to be framed into broader a regional prospect, reconstruction plans were concerned only with destroyed or severely damaged urban areas.

skills, so that this figurative language may best encompass the cultural values into which new forms are historically rooted. (Rogers, 1955)

In the Italian case, faced with the challenge of re-contextualising pre-existences environmental features, architects had to reflect on the legacy of the Masters and on the role of history and national traditions. Their creative acts should not be random or self-referential, thus, wherever a new building was facing the works of other artists, these had to be respected, if not enhanced. (Rogers, 1955) Somehow, approaching the real city in its historical dimension, was an antidote to modernist and populist formalism.

Rogers invited a group of younger architects to join the editorial staff of 'Casabella-Continuità', giving them increasing responsibilities. Some of their works, later labelled as neo-liberty (Portoghesi, 1958), were published in the issue n. 219, which was introduced by a short essay by Aldo Rossi. (Rossi, 1958). An earlier issue included works by Roberto Gabetti and Aimaro Isola<sup>5</sup> and two essays about the revival of tradition by Guido Canella (Canella, 1957) and by Aldo Rossi (Rossi, 1957). However cautious, Rogers was unbiased with the theoretical elaborations and accomplishments of the younger colleagues. Moreover, he believed that Italian architecture and its protagonists (Mario Ridolfi, Ignazio Gardella, BBPR, Franco Albini, Giuseppe Samonà, Giovanni Michelucci, Luigi Piccinato) may claim credit for historicising the Modern Movement's anti-historicism.

Three key projects by the BBPR partnership<sup>6</sup> convey a concrete picture of Rogers' ideas: the Torre Velasca in Milan (1950-58), the block of flats and offices in Corso Francia in Turin (1955-59) and the Civic Museums at the Sforza Castle in Milan (1954-56).

In its continuous transition from past to future, the historic city embodied reality and sense of place. A sort of museum in the making, a mosaic of past, present and future, the historic city fully expressed the values of tradition. Quite tellingly,

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<sup>5</sup> Among which the well-known *Bottega d'Erasmus* in Turin.

<sup>6</sup> Gian Luigi Banfi, Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti, Ernesto Nathan Rogers.

the issue of 'Casabella-Continuità' opening with Rogers' editorial entitled 'I CIAM al Museo.' (Rogers, 1959) included these three project.

The critical (re)reading of modern architecture and his focus on history and the context, brought Rogers into open opposition with Reyner Bahnam's schematic approach. Bahnam accused Rogers to support the Italian retreat from the modern architecture.

But when Casabella began to publish, with manifest editorial approval, buildings that went far beyond Vagnetti's in historicist eclecticism, when the BBPR partnership staged for the London Furniture Exhibition of 1958 an Italian section that seemed to be little more than a hymn of praise to Milanese borghese taste at its queasiest and most cowardly, and when, finally, the Italian exhibit at the Brussels Exhibition was seen, then confusion followed hard on disillusion. But behind our own private reactions there remain the buildings that produced them, and the attitude that produced the buildings, an attitude that even other Italians, like Bruno Zevi, clearly regard as wrong-headed and misguided. Indeed, these recent works of Gae Aulenti, Gregotti, Meneghetti, Stoppino, Gabetti, their associates and followers, and the polemics advanced in their defence by Aldo Rossi and others - all these call the whole status of the Modern Movement in Italy in question. (Bahnam, 1959, pp. 231-232)

Rogers replied with an article entitled 'L'evoluzione dell'architettura. Risposta al custode dei frigoriferi' (Rogers, 1959). He rejected the neo-liberty umbrella for so differing tendencies and researches. In addition, he argued that those kind reflections on Italian architecture required perhaps a broader research, looking at history as a tool to question modernist formalism.

### **The discourse on building types and urban form**

The 'retreat' sanctioned by Banham led into different lines of inquiry undertaken by Italian architects in the Sixties and Seventies, opening the way to a period of mutual exchange between urban studies, planning and design. Despite its broad

significance, this heated and articulated debate has been largely overlooked, perhaps because many statements circulated in Italian through handouts, pamphlets and transcripts.

Yet, the mutual influence between their varied theoretical positions deserves due consideration, partly because this was a period of transition from the major problems of post-war reconstruction to the new demands brought about by the metropolitan dimension acquired by North-Italian cities, facing a new wave of industrialisation and related migratory movements.

Additional factors combined to feed the architectural debate: the presence - both at IUAV University of Venice and at the Faculty of Architecture of Milan Politecnico - of undisputed masters like Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Giuseppe Samonà and Ludovico Quaroni, along with younger architects, including Carlo Aymonino, Guido Canella, Vittorio Gregotti, and Aldo Rossi.

Stepping out the Modern Movement to experiment new research trajectories, however from different theoretical positions, most Italian architects attached a paramount importance to the study of building types in their relationship with urban forms, exploring the historical context as a key element for future planning and urban design.

Giuseppe Samonà, then Rector of the IUAV University of Venice, provided an opportunity to bridge the generational gap, inviting eight young colleagues to hold a theoretical course on architectural design in the academic year 1965-66 (Canella, Coppa, Gregotti, Rossi, Samonà, Scimeni, Semerani, Tafuri, 1968).

Differing in their approaches, all their lessons discussed the possibility of singling out, and institutionalizing, the subsequent stages of the architectural design process.

Aldo Rossi, from the School of Architecture of Milan, proposed a rational explanation of the architectural conception, a somehow dogmatic definition of architecture as made up of stable facts, absolute and immutable over time. For Rossi, the city was a choral construct, and architecture was both a subjective and collective manifestation.

Discussing the relationship between building types, urban form and physical features, Guido Canella instead, defined morphology as a succession of events expressed in space and in a concrete historical framework. Typology to him was a specific configuration resulting from a particular succession: it could be therefore be intended as a systematic research for invariant elements of the urban form.

Consequently, the choice of an invariant morphological element acquired a methodological significance, establishing a true model of culture.

### **The contribution made by the Milan School**

It was precisely at the School of Architecture of Milan Politecnico, that alternative insights in the relationship between architecture and the city were gaining ground. This was partly due to unprecedented processes of urban transformation which, unlike in Venice, questioned the relationship between architectural and urban change in more dialectic terms, against an evolving social and economic reality (Canella, 1965). It is worth noting that 'The Architecture of the City', often considered a vision statement of the Italian architectural debate, sounded rather as a manifesto, particularly in Rossi's dazzling introduction:

This is why I speak with particular conviction of the importance of the historical method; but firmly believe that we cannot equate the study of cities simply to an historical study. We must pay special attention to the study of permanences to prevent the city's history from being permanent. I believe that permanences can also be considered in the same way as pathological elements. (Rossi 1966, p. 13)

These words had a profound impact on the Italian architectural scene of the Sixties. A practicing architect, Rossi claimed that gaining a thorough understanding of the city, as a historical and architectural construct, would open the way to projects expressing the historical memory embedded in places.

Guido Canella, with Lucio Stellario d'Angiolini and their interdisciplinary research team (Canella, 1974; D'Angiolini, 1965), moved beyond any descriptive taxonomy

of urban phenomena to identify the *forma urbis*, the form of the city as a materialization of structural factors.

Canella (1981) argued that the role of cities depended on their gravitational interaction, on varying relations of production in urban and rural societies, and on the development gap between different regions of the world. He valued the literature on anthropic landscapes as the most authentic expressions of problems faced and formalised by human societies, manifesting itself as a science in its ability to identify which significant features might also become substantial factors of change. Reflected upon the concept of 'structurality,' namely the interdependency of settlements in their relations of production, Canella often quoted the Franco-Belgian School (with Henri Pirenne's intuitions, Marcel Poëte's studies in urban planning, and the publication of the *Annales*).

In Italy, the above-mentioned authors had received particular attention among those who were trying to promote a reform in the theory of architectural design.

Canella and his team carried out research on the Milan region and the broader Po Valley area; this was studied in the *longue durée*, one long enough to identify which substantial factors of change could be examined without being confused by the visible but superficial turmoil of human activity. Canella's notion of 'context' implied as system of discrete components sharing the same socio-economic rationale; whether buildings, artefacts or urban element, such discrete components formed a sort of 'constellation' cross-referencing the local and regional levels. He considers the city as a 'living organism' with an underlying structure, a hidden but durable framework whose distinguishing features, to be identified case by case, might provide a key to interpret the present reality.

I believe that 'context' and 'place' have different meanings. 'Context' is the landscape constantly taking shape in a structural and anthropological sense.

'Place' intended in an environmental or naturalistic sense is something else.

'Place' acquires importance when an architectural conception ventures to interpret its making in the past and the resources available for the future.



Every authentic work of architecture follows a particular circuit, placing itself at the intersection between the architect's experience and the identity of the place, which the new intervention is to transform.

The cognitive-conceptual stage of architectural composition sets a dialectic path, whose outcome is a project intended for implementation. This clarifies why 'place' should not turn architecture into mimesis. Rather it should challenge a reflection on the role of architecture, focusing and re-configuring its typological, functional and formal features, whether complying or not with the pre-existing environment, yet fostering a vision for future change. (Canella, 1989, pp. 64,66)

Along this line of thought, Canella and his team explored the distinguishing settlement pattern of the Lombardy region, featuring a series of medium-sized towns along an early infrastructural network consisting of canals, roads and railways.

This original approach to urban studies was based on a synthesis between the concepts of form and structure, whereby the urban fabric was intended as a system of interrelated urban phenomena - however conterminous of distant they might be in space and time - rather than a continuum (as codified by the typomorphological school).

Encompassing the durability of urban artefacts, the concept of 'structurality' clearly transcends a taxonomic description of the city's physical elements - buildings and related open spaces, plots and streets - without neglecting the settlement's spatial quality. Moreover, the concept of 'structurality' implied identification of complex functional and morphological systems, namely spatial framework univocally related to a given context. Consequently, Canella conceived typology as an invariant of morphology, thus a part of a broader system yet possessing its own original characteristics.

The discourse over the urban 'structure' - albeit interpreted differently by Rossi and Canella - qualified the Milanese approach. The term 'structure' engaged both authors in a heated theoretical debate, on account its material and formal

implications (permanence and public space for Rossi<sup>7</sup>), and epistemological potential (Canella's concept of structurality). This reflection brought about the constitutive significance of the notion of 'urban structure' due to the persistence of some urban artefacts instead of others (monuments, precisely). At the same time, Rossi proposed a momentous reflection:

We have just distinguished between a historical or propelling permanence as a form of a past that we still experience (the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua, ndr.) and a pathological permanence as something that is isolated and aberrant. In large measure the pathological form is identifiable because of a particular *context*, since context itself can be seen either as the persistence of a function over time or as something isolated from the urban structure, that is, as something which stands outside of technological and social evolution. Context is commonly understood as referring primarily to residential sections of the city, and in this sense, its preservation is counter to the real dynamic of the city; so-called contextual preservation is related to the city in time like the embalmed corpse of a saint to the image of his historical personality. (Rossi 1982, p. 60).

In this sense, Rossi purports a non-academic concept of monument. Canella's idea of typology as 'invariant of morphology' implied that typology could be intended as an original 'spatial register' variable according to contextual conditions (not necessarily urban). This notion has a highly operational potential in both analytical and design processes, implying as it does the ideas of aggregation, consolidation and integration of functional-spatial contents.

### **Some concluding remarks**

Framing the contribution made by the School of Architecture of Milan within the Italian debate of the Sixties and Seventies, highlights the fruitful exchange of views between scholars for different disciplines, while also bringing to the fore the

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<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the first chapter of Aldo Rossi's book was entitled 'The Structure of Urban Artifacts'.

generative role of design in urban development.

What did matter was not the mere description of a typo-morphological device, nor its alleged prescriptive potential, rather was it understanding the original design synthesis expressed in architecture.

The focus was on those morphological 'fault lines' and spatial discontinuities embedded in urban artefacts: 'fault lines' which marked moments of rupture, when future scenarios had to be envisaged. Projects of urban transformation were necessary to modify the incremental evolution of cities, so that history could become something more than a continuum of progress.

In this respect, this approach may suggest several lines of inquiry: in moving beyond a taxonomy of heritage definitions, based on concepts like permanence, continuity, compliance with the historical morphology. Looking more closely to elements of discontinuity, promiscuity, interdependence (of functions and human behaviours) we might identify important elements of rupture, of historical discontinuity, as significant values. In addition, this approach may help us envisage the ratio of continuity/discontinuity, opposition/integration, inclusion/exclusion which a new scheme may introduce in a specific built environment.

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